DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 329 874 CG 023 245

AUTHOR Stuckey, Jon C.
TITLE The Sunday School Class: The Meaning of Older Women's Participation in Church.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Scientific Meeting of the Gerontological Society (43rd, Boston, MA, November 16-20, 1990).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Churches; *Church Role; *Females; *Older Adults; *Social Support Groups

ABSTRACT

This study examined the role of the church in providing elderly women with a structure within which to maintain social contact and spiritual support into old age. Twenty-one middle-class, older white women, all of whom lived in the same small Ohio town, attended the same Methodist church, and belonged to the same Sunday school class, were interviewed (n=21). Three themes emerged from the interviews: (1) the class members were very close to one another; (2) the impact of widowhood upon church participation varied; and (3) age-strata emerged in the church despite the ready availability of intergenerational contact. The church had provided subjects with a source of social support throughout their lives, but its degree of importance varied across time, with the pattern of church participation among the subjects following a curvilinear trend. While the church may hold different meanings to each of these women, all them found it important to attend regularly and to continue their participation. Although the findings of this study are not generalizable to society as a whole, they do suggest that churches may have the potential to meet some of the social support needs of their congregations, especially the widowed, never married, and childless. (BHK)

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THE SUNDAY SCHOOL CLASS: THE MEANING OF OLDER WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN CHURCH

JON C. STUCKEY
DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY
CASE WESTERN RESERVE UNIVERSITY
CLEVELAND, OH 44106

* Presented at the annual meeting of the Gerontological Society of America, Boston, November 1990.

INTRODUCTION

As people age through the life course, they move along a continuum exiting and entering different roles and stages in life. When older age approaches, individuals often exit familiar roles but are presented with few well-defined new roles to replace them (Rosow, 1985). Isolation may ensue. However, church activities may provide elderly persons with a structure within which to maintain social contact and spiritual support into old age.

The support network provided by a church may be especially important to older women who are more likely than men to spend a significant part of their adult lives as widows. Widowhood is perhaps one of the most stressful life events. The loss of a spouse may drastically alter the lifestyle of the survivor (Martin Matthews, 1987). The companionship, support, and simply the presence of the spouse are gone, and replacements may not be readily forthcoming.

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Much of the literature on widowhood deals with the intense early phase after the death of the spouse (e.g., Goldberg, Comstock, & Harlow, 1988; Hill, Thompson, & Gallagher, 1988; Caine, 1988). Over time, however, the intensity of the effects of becoming a widow may lessen, and other opportunities for support may compensate for that which was lost (Ferraro, 1984). Shanas (1979) suggests that while one's spouse is the greatest source of social support, children and other relatives or friends may become substitutes. A church may also serve as an alternative form of support. Moreover, other widows within a church may integrate the newly bereaved into a sustaining network. The existence and benefits of this type of network among widows has been documented in the literature (Goldberg et al, 1988; Kohen, 1983; Lopata, 1973, 1979; Arling, 1976).

The research on church participation among the elderly is somewhat equivocal. It has been argued that church participation declines in old age for a variety of reasons (Windley & Scheidt, 1983; Bahr, 1970; Moberg, 1968). Nevertheless, coinciding with this decline is a continuation of religious attitudes (Blazer & Palmore, 1976) and a rise in nonorganizational religious participation (Ainlay & Smith, 1984; Mindel & Vaughn, 1978). For example, instead of attending church every Sunday, some elderly may listen to religious broadcasts over the radio or engage in personal Bible study.

In an ethnographic study Van Willigen (1989) found that church participation in a rural Kentucky county did not decline with age.

In addition, he describes the church as a clearinghouse of information regarding the status of members in the congregation. If a person is ill or in need of prayer, other members may send cards, prepare meals, or visit. More than simply a spiritual support or social activity then, the church may provide tangible necessary assistance in times of need.

Of specific importance to the present study is the role of the church as a source of support to older women over the life course. Interest in this topic stemmed from casual observations of a medium-sized Methodist church in Woodtown, Ohio (all person and place names are fictional). Members of the church in Woodtown appeared to associate with those approximately their own age. Moreover, it seemed that little dialogue was conducted across age groups. The project began as an examination into how this age segregation originated, and how the elder's church participation evolved over the life course. Other areas of interest developed after analyzing the initial data. Such phenomena as how the oldest Sunday school class in the church, which was largely comprised of women 70 and over, become an apparently autonomous unit within the church and how widowhood effected church participation emerged as contributing focal points of the study.

DATA COLLECTION

Data were collected through tape-recorded guided conversations with 21 elders. The majority of interviews lasted between 45 minutes to one hour, but some were as long as two hours. Nineteen of the interviews occurred in the informants' homes; two were conducted in the church. The first part of the interview guide consisted of general questions concerning the informant's life, including place of birth, childhood, and employment history. Informants then were asked to discuss when they started attending the church and if they were a member of a Sunday school class or other organizations within the church. Information was also gathered about whom they considered to be their friends in the church, with whom they chose to sit during the morning worship service, and with whom they were in contact outside of the church setting. Finally, the informants were asked how their participation in church had changed over time. Because this proved to be a difficult question for many of the informants to answer, probes were used to help them express at what times in their lives they felt the most or least attached to the church.

At first, the process of contacting possible informants was not systematic. Being an older member of the church was the only salient criterion for inclusion in the study. The organist was the first informant and she suggested two more members to contact. Coincidentally, all of these women belonged to the same Sunday school class. Other members of the church had deemed it "the class for old ladies," apparently because most in the class were female

and over 70. This particular Sunday school class became the pool from which informants were drawn.

Though each is unique, the interviews contain several common themes. This is not surprising since these women have experienced comparable life histories. While some have not been attending the class as long as others, all have lived in the same town for most of their lives. Consequently, they knew one another before joining the class. Most of these women belonged to the same cohort and socioeconomic class; they have all led similar lives.

Nevertheless, the common ideas expressed are noteworthy. Three themes emerged from these data. First, the class members are very close. Nearly all of the informants listed each other as friends. Second, the impact of widowhood upon church participation varied. Becoming a member of the class typically occurred after the death of the husband. Furthermore, other church-related activities may change as well. Some of the informants were drawn closer to the church after the death of their husbands while others were forced to cease selected church activities because they did not drive. Others indicated that church participation was not significantly effected by widowhood. Third, age-strata have emerged in the church despite the fact that intergenerational contact is readily available. Following a general description of the town and the church and the church participation of these women through the life course, each of these themes is discussed in detail.

THE TOWN AND THE CHURCH

Woodtown is an old railroad community founded in 1852. While originally very small, today it has grown to a population of over 7,000. Woodtown is essentially rural, but it does have a modest industrial park with manufacturing and dairy plants. When visiting Woodtown, it is hard to miss the small-town atmosphere. Many of the houses are older Victorian structures, most of the streets are lined with large oak and maple trees, and everybody seems to know everybody else's life histories. There is one high school, one hospital, one library, one post office, and one McDonald's.

The Woodtown Methodist Sunday school class studied for this project was created in 1913 for the female teenagers in the church. While the policy has since been abandoned, at that time, men and women had separate classes. Moreover, classes were structured according to age. Theoretically, as the young people aged, they were to be promoted to classes for consecutively older age groups. However, after these women married, they decided they would not advance to the next class. Rather than moving on, they stayed together through marriage, rearing children, entering middle adulthood, and then becoming widowed. "We took in a younger class because we didn't move on," said one informant. "When another class was ready to move on, they came into our class."

Most of the early members of the class are now dead. In fact, at the time this project was initiated, no charter members of the class were living. The majority of current members started attending after becoming widowed, which has typically been within

the past ten years. However, two class members had been attending since 1917. One of these women became an informant for this study. Others in the class consider her the expert on the class history. The other woman died prior to being contacted.

Twenty of the 26 active members of the class were informants for the research. Another, though not a member, is the daughter-in-law of a charter member. Only one of the members is a man who attends with his wife, and five of them are married. Informants ranged in age from 71 to 93.

The man in the class is considered somewhat of an anomaly, except by his wife. She alone described the story of how her husband became a member of the class:

> All of the men in the class have died except my husband. So they had a meeting and all the women voted he should stay with us. He's our only man so I'm real proud of him.

None of the other informants referred to such an election, and mentioned him in passing, or simply as "the only man." Evidently, when the men's class lost most of its members to death, it joined with the women's class. But now, with one exception, these men are also dead.

Nearly all members of the class attend every Sunday. They faithfully meet for Sunday school, the monthly class business meeting, and dinner every Sunday. However, others are called "social members" by those who are active because they attend irregularly or only participate in the business meeting and parties. For the most part these "social members" are married or

are active with their children, whether it be caring for grandchildren or preparing Sunday dinner for their extended family. Some are labeled "inactive" on the class roster. These people either live in nursing homes and cannot attend church or have moved away from the area.

CHURCH PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE LIFE COURSE

The church has provided these women with a definite source of social support throughout their lives, but its degree of importance varied across time and because of competing commitments. The pattern of church participation among the informants followed a curvilinear trend. When they were children they spent a great deal of time at church activities. All of these women have been involved with a church since childhood, though not necessarily with the Woodtown church. However, the women explained that once they were married and had families, rearing children caused them to withdraw from church activities. They made sure the children attended, but many said they became less involved with some of the extra commitments:

> When my girls were smaller, I couldn't attend everything that was going on in the church. I had my three girls pretty close together. But we started the girls to Sunday school just as soon as they were old enough to go. And they always went to church and Sunday school.

> We would go to Sunday school once in awhile. And we took the children to Sunday school and I think we came home. We must have gone back to church or something because they went to Sunday school. We just aren't really morning people. My husband, of course, worked and he always had to get up, and I think Sunday morning we just didn't push.

As the women aged they experienced less conflicts of time. Now that their children are grown, some of the widows indicated that they have become more involved and felt more attached to the church:

> I was probably less attached to the church when I was busy with my children. And after I became a widow and started that class, I feel more attached now.
>
> Well, really, when your children were small, you didn't get there. And now you have the time. For example, I'm a chairman (of one of the women's groups). At one time I wouldn't have taken that, but now that the kids are grown I can.

THEMES

Class Unity:

The Sunday school class is a self-sustaining, protective unit. The women look after each other. One remarked, "My class, they're so closely knit that you can't believe it." Another called it a "support group." Those who drive chauffeur those who cannot to church, to dinner, or to one of the church's five women's clubs. The corresponding secretary of the class sees that the shut-ins, those who are no longer able to attend because of ill health, receive a card when they are sick and for all the major holidays:

> Well, just anyone in our class who is ill, or in the hospital, we go to see them, or maybe they had a death in the family. We're a very close group. We're just like real close friends. We're almost family!

One informant, 85, often walks to three of the other women's homes to check on them and talk with them a few minutes. Another woman is driven back and forth to the class every Sunday by two of the members. The woman who takes her home explained:

> Nan used to live right down here on Grant Street. She has two daughters, both who live quite a ways away. And when she was in her 80's (she is now 92) she needed someone to touch base with, and I just became very close with her. And so now I just walk up there with her in church. Inez goes and gets her every Sunday over at (the retirement community) where she now lives. And she brings her over and I take her home. So we kind of look after her.

The members of the class listed either the entire class or specific members as their closest friends. One said, for example, "All in my Sunday school class are my best friends. Just everyone of them. I just love each one of them."

The fact that most of these women eat out together every Sunday seems to have increased the cohesiveness of the group. Those widows without family commitments are free to have Sunday dinner together. It is these women who seem to derive the most satisfaction from their church attendance.

> Oh, we go out and we eat and we sit and talk for quite awhile. I've said sometime they're going to ask us for rent on the table! But, it's enjoyable because, you know, Sundays are lonely if you're by yourself.

> The (older) women seem to enjoy it and we have fun riding together. And the last two Sundays we drove around a little while to see the trees because these ladies, a lot of them, don't drive. And they appreciate it very much when we take them for a little extra ride. So as long as I can drive I can help out. But I think they enjoy it and I do, too. It's fellowship that continues after church. Then we take them home and they have the afternoon to themselves.

> We go out to eat every Sunday after church. That way we don't have to eat alone. I'd have to come here at home and eat all by myself and get dinner, and I get sick of getting dinner. Oh, it's wonderful to be able to go out like that! It's a wonderful thing. I wouldn't give that up for anything on earth.

Those women who have family responsibilities do not participate in the weekly dinner. They spend the day with their children. As Shanas (1979) asserts, the opportunity for family support takes precedence over time with friends:

> On Sunday I come right home from church because I expect some of my kids to be here for dinner. So I cook and they usually come.
>
> I haven't gotten in to going out to eat yet. My son lives close and I usually go eat with him.

The Effects of Widowhood Upon Church Participation:

The effects of widowhood upon church participation were varied. As previously mentioned, only the early members of the class joined when they were young and remained members throughout their lives. The others, because they were not comfortable being in a couples class after their husbands died, joined after they became widows. The women felt uneasy being single persons in a room full of couples:

> After my husband died why I went to that class. The other class was mostly couples and you do feel out of place.
>
> After I lost my husband, I went to that class. I decided I'd go to a class that was just the women.
>
> After I became a widow, a lot of the women have found that it's more fun to go into that class, even though they are over 80. The other class is couples, you see. And so several of the ladies in there who are widows are younger [65-75].
>
> I was alone and I felt those women, I'd enjoy them. I'd be more content, and feel that I belonged there more than the (other) class because most of those are couples.

The class continues to grow because new widows are continuously "recruited" by members. Many of the informants

mentioned the widow who asked them to join. The women keep track of the men who die and one of the women contacts the widow to ask her to join the class:

> After my husband died, somebody asked me to join the Sunday school class and that's the best thing I ever did in my life. That is some Sunday school class. When you're alone, it's a nice class. Now did you know that man that just died? Well, I asked his wife if she would come to our class. And she said, you know, I've heard of that class and I think I will.

The fact that widowhood is an important criterion for being an active member of the class was evident. Those who have remarried have changed their pattern of participation. One of the members who was not an informant had remarried about two years earlier, and no longer attended the class. She moved to a neighboring town and only visits during the monthly meeting, or class parties, even though she has remained president of the class. Similarly, one of the women happened to be married during the data collection phase of this project. She had not returned to the class since her remarriage and was unsure of her future participation in the class. It is not clear whether the women feel they have broken some sort of bond with the other widows in the class or if they have other time commitments that make it more difficult to attend.

Other effects of widowhood upon church participation did not necessarily relate to the class. First, attendance at night activities may cease. Many of the women no longer drive and even if they knew how and continued to drive, some were uncomfortable

venturing out at night. They had relied upon their husbands for much of their transportation needs:

> Anything that goes on at night, I don't go to. I don't like to go out at night very well. I'm so afraid I'll fall. At this stage I don't want to fall and break a bone! So I don't go very often at night anymore. And when my husband lived we would go to things that were going on in the evening at the church. That has changed for me. Even the missionary meeting, sometimes they have them at night. Well, I just don't go then. I don't feel as I want to go out at night.

Second, activity in church may increase if the husband's death was tragic and untimely. One woman, in particular, became more involved with the church after her husband was killed in a farming accident:

> I didn't really get active again until after my husband was killed. And then everything fell on me. You know, it's a sad thing that when you study scriptures you find out over and over, when we're down and out, that's when we find that we need God. And it's a shame that in our humanness, that's how we are. So I'm sure that my relationship with the church deepened and became stronger out of necessity. You know, there is no miracle thing that happens because you are a Christian, when you have sadness or the unwanted things that come into your life. I don't believe that God does those things to you, nor do I believe that he would just reach down and take them away. Some people would like to think that they could just pray and some sort of miracle would remove all this. But your faith is what keeps you moving, and growing, and going, and living through it. And life goes on.

Third, if the church was not the major social activity in the life of the widow before the husband's death or if she had a steady pattern of attendance before he died, the effect of widowhood upon church participation may not be significant. Some of the women were active in bridge groups, homemaker clubs, and literary guilds as well as the church. These women found that their participation in church has remained constant throughout their lives:

> It helped to have the support of the church after he died, and I just kept on going. I went to church before he died and I went after.
>
> I think because of the life I've led, it hasn't been all church. My husband was in business. He traveled and was in a lot of groups. We traveled and I taught. We had a very diversified life, I think. I've got friends all over the world so I don't think of just the church.

Age Strata in the Church:

Theoretically, a church would be an ideal setting for social contacts across age lines. However, while many of the informants wished that more younger people would join the church, several indicated an underlying tension between the young and the old, especially among adjacent cohorts.

> It seems like the young [40-50] are separated and the older are separated. But those young people need to stop and think that they're going to be in our position some day.

Moreover, the older members did not feel the same degree of closeness with the younger members as they did with each other. "You used to know everybody" was a typical comment. The older members remembered a closer church than the one today, and some felt isolated from the younger members:

> There's so many new people in our church that I don't know really well, you know. There for a long time you knew about everybody in the church. And now, they have so many new ones.
>
> There just seems there used to be a closer relationship with people than now. I imagine it was just a sign of the times though. The children are being raised differently and the women are working. I don't know maybe it's age, but it just doesn't seem that there is as tight a closeness as there was years ago. I think it's because I used to know everybody in the church, the church membership wasn't as big. But right now, you know, we don't get together quite as much.

One of the informants attributed her unfamiliarity with younger people to her retirement from the high school. When she worked as a guidance counselor she knew all of the students by name:

> I don't work with young people anymore. When I was teaching in high school, I used to know all of them. I'd follow them and what they did and everything. I had a sheet for each student, and I kept track of all their grades, and I was responsible for sending out all the transcripts to the colleges, and things like that, so I was keeping up with the young people. Now I don't know them. So I'm limited to just our class.

It may be that obstacles to intergenerational contact are inherent in church practices that divide Sunday school classes by age. All of the five adult Sunday school classes in the Woodtown church are age-related. The oldest is the class discussed in this study. The second class is what used to be the "young" couples class and is now the 50-65 group. The third and fourth are what used to be the "new young" couples classes which are the 35-50 group. The fifth class, the newest "new young" couples class, is the 20-35 group, but only two couples belong. The rest of the class is comprised of single people or those who attend church without their spouses.

The church has five women's missionary groups called "circles" that meet once a month. Some of these groups do vary by age, but it is mainly those meeting in the evening that appear to be age-heterogeneous. The younger women who work cannot attend the afternoon or morning circles. Consequently, those who meet in the afternoon or morning have a higher proportion of older women. The few older informants in the night circles mentioned that they enjoy

being with younger people. One of the night circles ranged in age from early 20's to 92. All of the informants involved with this group clearly indicated that the different ages were an added benefit for the members. However, most of the informants belonged to circles whose members were close to their own age.

While some in the class sit with their children's families during the worship service, there is a noticeable age-related seating arrangement in the sanctuary. The young people sit in the balcony, the older couples sit together in the back left section, the middle-aged couples sit more toward the middle, and the widows all congregate in what is referred to by some class members as "widow row."

The reason explaining the seating arrangement of the widows may not be age per se, but rather the fact that losing one's spouse may cause a change in behavior and relationships. Some women said that their seating habits during the Sunday morning worship service changed after their husbands died:

> Till my husband died, why I sat with him. But now I sit with the Sunday school class; most of them are widows.
>
> I was married a second time and he liked to sit on the right side because he liked to see the choir. So we sat on that side. But it seems all the widows sit on the other side so I went back to that side (after my second husband died) because all the widows sit on that side from the Sunday school class. They go in and sit pretty much together.
>
> I usually sit in the same place every Sunday that row of widows, the "widow row"! I moved over to the widows after my husband died.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study are clearly not generalizable to society as a whole. These are similar, middle-class, white women living in a small Ohio town. Other work has been critical of non-representative samples when dealing with social participation in later life (Ferraro, 1984). Furthermore, it has been reported that women, in particular, tend to score higher on religiosity than men (Blazer & Palmore, 1976; Orbach, 1961).

However, the implications derived from the examination of 21 experiences with church over the life course may be far-reaching. These women feel very attached to the church in their old age. This would tend to support the findings of others (Ainlay & Smith, 1984; Mindel & Vaughn, 1978) that suggests church participation may not be objectively measurable but is more of a subjective perception.

Of notable interest is the lack of intergenerational contact within the Woodtown church. Presumably, younger ages are grouped together because the classes are patterned after ability. First graders could not be taught in the same manner as eighth graders. This policy, however, need not continue into the adult classes. Young people could easily be paired with older members of the church. Moreover, intergenerational contact would not need to be confined to Sunday school. Church picnics or outings would be ideal opportunities to facilitate intergenerational communication. Perhaps people prefer to associate with those closer to their own

age (Rosow, 1985), but occasional contacts across cohorts seems a worthwhile endeavor.

The church may have different meanings to each of these women, but all of them find it important enough to attend regularly and continue their participation. Churches have the potential to meet some of the social support needs of their congregations, especially the widowed, never married, and childless. These vulnerable groups are often left without filial support when experiencing ill health or loneliness. While most of the informants had other occasions for social contact, the church afforded them an additional opportunity to maintain relationships after widowhood, and avoid aging in isolation.

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